DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 530 CS 507 855

AUTHOR Burns, Gary
TITLE Popular Culture Studies and the Politics of Educational "Crisis."
PUB DATE 6 Jun 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at "The Future of Popular Culture Studies in the Twenty-First Century" Conference (Bowling Green, OH, June 6, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conservatism; Cultural Context; Educational Finance; Financial Problems; *Higher Education; Humanities; Mass Media; *Political Issues; *Politics of Education; *Popular Culture; *Tenure; Tenured Faculty
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

The conservative position on the crisis in the humanities is fundamentally antidemocratic and poses a danger to popular culture studies. This can be demonstrated by taking issue with conservatives' usage of the terms "crisis" and "politics." A crisis is an urgent problem, but by labeling something a crisis which is not, attention is distracted from actual urgent problems. The status of the profession is in crisis, but this has to do with funding problems such as poor pay and bad working conditions, deteriorating facilities, the elimination of academic programs, the erosion of academic freedom and tenure, and the high cost of going to college--problems overlooked by conservatives. Politics is viewed by conservatives as the primary cause of the crisis in the humanities, especially left-liberalism, which apparently includes popular culture. However, conservatives pay practically no attention to what generally is meant by university politics, including resource allocation. Attacks against certain departments, such as those that teach popular culture, focus on their alleged "non-centrality" to the arts and humanities, but this is arbitrary and antidemocratic. The political becomes highly personal when it involves tenure decisions and funding. An example in which tenure was denied simply because of the teacher's main field of study was popular culture, indicates a dangerous antidemocratic spirit. Several things can be done by targeted faculty members to combat the attacks on programs like popular culture: (1) publicize stories of bad tenure decisions; (2) file grievances; (3) support each other through correspondence; (4) develop institutional clout; and (5) vigorously protest attempts to limit academic freedom. (HB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED346530

Popular Culture Studies and the Politics of Educational "Crisis"

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gary Burns

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Gary Burns, Associate Professor
Department of Communication Studies
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL 60115
815-753-7108

CS507655

Presented at "The Future of Popular Culture Studies in the Twenty-First Century," a conference in honor of Ray B. Browne, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH, June 6, 1992.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Popular Culture Studies and the Politics of Educational "Crisis"

It's an honor to share the podium with such distinguished people, and it's a special privilege to have this opportunity to pay tribute to Ray Browne, whom we all owe an enormous debt of gratitude. I think the one thing we could do that would honor Ray the most would be to reaffirm our commitment not only to the study of popular culture, but also to democracy, which I think is the ideal that inspires our studies.

My own function on this panel, as I understand it, is to expose the agenda of the so-called crisis in the humanities. In doing this, I'm going to draw from an article I wrote called "Television and the Crisis in the Humanities."[1] To fit the occasion, I'm going to broaden my focus beyond television to popular culture in general. My argument, in a nutshell, is that the conservative position on the crisis in the humanities is fundamentally antidemocratic and poses a danger to popular culture studies. To demonstrate this point, I'm going to take issue with conservatives' usage of the terms "crisis" and "politics."

Crisis

A crisis is an urgent problem. Of course, it's easy to call something a crisis, even if it's not urgent, and even if it's not really a problem. By doing this, one distracts attention from <u>actual</u> urgent problems. Intentionally or not, this has been one effect of conservative rhetoric about the crisis in the humanities.

When I say "conservative," I'm referring primarily to William Bennett, Allan Bloom, Lynne Cheney, Dinesh D'Souza, Roger Kimball, Hilton Kramer, and Charles Sykes. Somewhat problematically, we may also include E.D. Hirsch in this group. These people certainly don't have identical views, and they certainly don't speak for all conservatives. Nevertheless, I think it's fair to attribute to this group a fairly coherent set of propositions that I'm calling the "conservative position."

That position is that there is a crisis in the humanities, or in liberal education, in the United States. Manifestations of the crisis include the following: widespread "cultural illiteracy"; disarray in the typical undergraduate curriculum; dilution of the canon of literary classics; substitution of popular culture for literature as an object of study in teaching and research; the rise of women's studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, and other new fields; overspecialization and triviality in research (and a concomitant neglect of teaching); and overemphasis on cultural diversity, sensitivity, and multiculturalism on campus.

The alleged perpetrators of this alleged crisis are professors, especially an alleged throng of "tenured radicals" who have stifled conservative dissent on campus by means of speech codes, a so-called "new McCarthyism," and other devices of what the conservatives call "political correctness."

Even if we acknowledge some merit in the conservative position (and I do), is "crisis" a proper label for what the conservatives are complaining about? Especially, is "the crisis" or "the real crisis" a proper label? No. The conservative view of "crisis" is little more than melodramatic handwringing by a group of cozily situated spectators. They presume to enumerate the shortcomings of professors and universities, yet they do so from comfortable positions on the sidelines. (Bloom and Hirsch are partial exceptions.)

The conservative writings on the crisis have the flavor of muckraking exposes of university life. Kimball's Tenured Radicals and Sykes's ProfScam are prime examples.[2] The problem is that the research supporting these diatribes consists mostly of attending conferences and scanning journals, college catalogues, and the like. The result is an amusing and frequently on-target critique of specific items from conferences, journals, and college catalogues. Unfortunately, this reveals

practically nothing about day-to-day university activities. In the hands of Kimball and Sykes, the crisis in the humanities is an unwarranted extrapolation of isolated complaints they have about conference programs, journals, and college catalogues. Suppose, instead, that we looked at the humanities and liberal education from the perspective of teachers and students--that is, from the trenches rather than from the sidelines. Is there a crisis that the conservatives are overlooking? Yes--in fact, there are several.

From the teacher's point of view, the status of the profession is certainly in crisis--throughout the university, but especially in the humanities. Manifestations of this crisis include low raises, poor pay and working conditions, deteriorating facilities, budget cuts, crowded classrooms, exploitation of teaching assistants and part-time faculty, low morale, and an anticipated severe shortage of qualified humanities faculty. That's my list from a year ago. To that I would now add the elimination and proposed elimination of academic programs, and the resulting erosion of academic freedom and tenure. Again, the problem exists throughout the university but seems to be most acute in programs based in the humanities. I know of two examples that should particularly concern us as popular culture advocates.

The first is library science. My own employer, Northern Illinois University, has recently announced the elimination of this program. Other universities that have recently canceled library science include Vanderbilt, Columbia, and Chicago.[3] My former employer, the University of Missouri, is considering transferring library science (and other programs) halfway across the state, from one campus to another. That's probably better than eliminating the program, but such a level of disruption still qualifies as a crisis, I'd say.

The second example is media studies. The latest issue of Feedback,

a journal of the Broadcast Education Association, contains an open letter by Professor Susan Eastman, of Indiana University, in support of the University of Maryland's Radio-TV-Film Department, which faces proposed elimination.[4] Last year I signed a petition in support of the Film and Photography Department at Ohio State, also proposed for elimination. Media programs at SIU-Carbondale, Oregon, and SUNY-Cortland have gone through similar crises in recent years. You probably know of other examples.

From a student's perspective, there are several additional points of crisis, including the high cost of going to college; declining availability of financial aid; balancing school, family, and career demands; and closed and canceled classes. That's my list from a year ago. Since then another crisis has arisen--1992 college graduates face "the toughest job market in two decades."[5]

I would argue that these are the real crises in the humanities and in higher education generally. About these matters, the highly visible conservative critics of higher education have practically nothing to say.

Politics

In the conservative view, the primary causes of the crisis in the humanities are politics and corruption on the part of professors. The subtitle of Kimball's Tenured Radicals is "How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education." The jacket of Sykes's ProfScam proclaims: "ProfScam reveals the direct and ultimate reason for the collapse of higher education in the United States--the selfish, wayward, and corrupt American university professor." Sykes's The Hollow Men is subtitled "Politics and Corruption in Higher Education." D'Souza's Illiberal Education is subtitled "The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus."[6]

What the conservatives mean by "politics" is left-liberalism, which includes Marxism, feminism, Afrocentrism, multiculturalism, and apparently popular culture. The conservatives see such "politics" everywhere they look (i.e., conference programs, journals, and college catalogues). To their chagrin, they find that somehow the forces of "politics" have managed to triumph over the eternal truths (even though such a thing should not be possible).

The conservative effort to stigmatize the left as "political" and to feign an apolitical superiority is deceptive but by now familiar. It occasionally serves a useful purpose by debunking nonsense, but ultimately it's a harmful distraction. Just as the conservative discourse on crisis overlooks the real crisis, the conservative commotion about politics pays practically no attention to what we usually think of as university politics--committee meetings, elections, tenure decisions, retirement incentives and agreements, administrative edicts, grievances, five-year plans, self-studies, mission statements, annual evaluations and salary increments (or lack thereof), course evaluations, release time awards, internal searches for assistant vice chancellors, and hundreds of other maddening and highly political rituals that constitute what I would call the real politics of the university.

The main function of these rituals is to allocate--and, these days, reallocate--resources. This process pits individuals against each other to a certain extent, but the more significant competition is that between departments and, correspondingly, between disciplines.

The real university politics determines how the real crisis in the humanities is distributed among the various departments. The dynamics of this cannibalistic competition are hard to see at most times, even for people who work at the university. There are many ways to favor one department over another without appearing to do so and without appearing

to be unfair. The moment of ultimate political truth arrives when a department or program is eliminated. Then we hear tragedy disguised as necessity through the antiseptic rhetoric of "vertical cuts" and "building on strength."

We also sometimes hear the invocation of a quasi-objective standard by which to judge disciplines. In Susan Eastman's open letter about Radio-TV-Film at the University of Maryland, she says: "I understand one of the reasons for cutting this department is that the field is not perceived as 'central to the role of a College of Arts and Humanities.'" That's the second time I've heard this excuse used to support the proposed elimination of a media program.

Two items are of particular interest in Eastman's account--the idea of "centrality" and the department's location within a College of Arts and Humanities. "Centrality" seems to me to be an arbitrary and circular category. It's also anti-democratic. Normally we do not make official distinctions between central and not-so-central departments. To do so is to create a political hierarchy among supposed equals. It's like saying Kansas is better than Hawaii because Kansas is more central, and therefore we're going to eliminate Hawaii.

The department's membership in the College of Arts and Humanities raises another interesting political question--should the department really be eliminated, or merely removed from the College? After all, business, as an academic discipline, is not "central" to the arts and humanities, yet we don't see any movement to eliminate business programs. Perhaps we would if business were within the College, but all signs I see point in the opposite direction, toward an increasing focus within the College on business concerns--business writing courses in English departments, business ethics courses in philosophy departments, organizational and industrial emphases in psychology departments, and so forth.

I see no conservative protest against this political development, which waters down the undergraduate curriculum in a generally rightwing direction. In the real politics of the university, the School of Business typically holds great power--for example, Business usually has representation in university decision-making on a par, or near par, with the entire liberal arts college, and certainly equal to or greater than all the humanities departments combined.

That's not to say that business professors are bad people, only that they escape conservative criticism because business is a conservative force and because the business curriculum, in all its vulgarity, resides outside the liberal arts college, whereas the tenured radicals and popular culture scholars are mostly within it. Here again, the conservatives create a false impression about the politics of the situation. They would have us believe that radicals and popular culturalists have taken over the liberal arts college, whereas the reality is that departments, programs, and individuals whose interests lie outside traditional disciplinary boundaries or norms often find the College an extremely hostile environment.

Conclusion

I'm going to conclude this brief critique of the conservative view of crisis and politics on a personal note and suggest some of the tasks we face as popular culture teachers and researchers as we head toward the 21st century. By now it's a cliche that the personal is political--and I believe that--but in this instance I'd like to turn the phrase around. The political is personal.

When Roger Kimball complains about tenured radicals, that's an analysis of university politics, even though it's a faulty one, as I've tried to show. But it's also an implied proposal about the future of individuals. If the problem is that some radicals are tenured, the implied solution is to deny tenure to any who come up in the future and perhaps even untenure the ones

who are already in. For the individual on the receiving end of such a policy, the political is quite personal.

Kimball doesn't explicitly propose this, and popular culture professors are not all radicals. Still, we find several of the conservatives condemning popular culture research as worthless--including articles in the Journal of Popular Culture, papers presented at MLA (which some of you attend), and studies of Louis L'Amour by Jane Tompkins (who is scheduled to speak at this conference). Hilton Kramer advocates eliminating film from universities, both as an object of study and as an audio-visual aid--and some of you teach and study film. If we can't study what we want to study, we have no academic freedom. If what we teach is removed from the curriculum, we're out of a job.

I was denied tenure at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in 1987. My department supported me unanimously. The College did not. I filed a grievance and won, but by then I had already moved. The grievance process was very enlightening. I found out that the main reason for the decision was a bias against my department (which was "weak"), my discipline (communication), and my areas of specialty (popular music, television, and film). This didn't seem to be a case of conservatives voting against a radical for explicitly political reasons, but that's no comfort to me and no excuse for an anti-democratic decision. One of the dangers of the conservative attack against radicals and popular culture is that it makes people comfortable with their prejudices, as Rosalynn Carter said about Ronald Reagan. If the conservative view prevails, we in popular culture studies can expect more tenure denials, dismissals, budget cuts, ridicule of the curriculum, and other attacks, for no good reason. These attacks will come not necessarily from conservative extremists, but from our colleagues who study more traditional subjects and are comfortable with their prejudices.

No sooner had my own misfortunes begun than I started hearing about colleagues at other universities going through similar travails, for similar reasons. That's discouraging, but there's a bright side to the picture. I did win, eventually. I put the university through a lot of grief, and I'm sure the people who derailed my life will at least have second thoughts before they do the same thing to somebody else. I received fine support from a lot of people, including Ray Browne, Lee Cooper, Gary Edgerton, Fred MacDonald, and several other people from PCA and ACA. I've tried to give that back by writing letters in support of people being reviewed for tenure or promotion and people who've been denied tenure.

I think the future of popular culture studies is bright, but I also think we need to be vigilant. The real crisis in higher education will continue, as will the conservative attack against popular culture. The real politics of academia will continue to put popular culture studies at a disadvantage at many institutions.

There are several things we can do to combat this. First, I think it's good to share stories of personal hardships such as tenure denials. It's good therapy for the individual and a reminder to others that bad political things can still happen to good people.

Second, we can file grievances and legal complaints when sufficient grounds exist. That's not a viable option for some people, who are devastated enough without putting themselves through further turmoil with unpredictable results. But for those who have the gumption and think they're right, I do recommend fighting. In fact, I think it's a duty.

Third, we can support each other by writing letters protesting unjust tenure denials, elimination of programs, and other atrocities. Administrators don't like to hear that they've done something wrong, but they need to hear it. They need to understand that they've

offended a constituency.

Fourth, I hope PCA and ACA will continue to develop their institutional clout and their advocacy function. I wouldn't want these organizations to become preoccupied with professional issues, but our interdisciplinary membership gives us a unique strength and a special obligation to take positions in defense of popular culture studies when the need arises. At a minimum, we should encourage panels about professional matters at the annual conference.

Fifth and last, whenever anyone--conservative or otherwise--proposes to limit what scholars can study or teachers can teach at universities, we should vigorously protest and resist this assault against academic freedom and free speech. We should take every opportunity to write and speak in support of popular culture studies and democracy. That's what Ray Browne has always done, and that's why it's appropriate and important for us to honor him today.

Thank you.

Notes

[1] Gary Burns, "Television and the Crisis in the Humanities," Journal of Popular Film & Television 19 (Fall 1991), 98-105; reprinted in Rejuvenating the Humanities, ed. Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 149-162. See this article for elaboration of some of my arguments in the present paper and for more complete citation of sources.

[2] Roger Kimball, Tenured Radicals, paperback ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990); Charles J. Sykes, ProfScam (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1988).

[3] "Fiscal, Accreditation Pressures Force Out LIS Department," Northern Now, Summer 1992, 2. Northern Now is the alumni newspaper of Northern Illinois University.

[4] Susan Tyler Eastman, "An Open Letter to the University of Maryland," Feedback 33, no. 1 (Winter 1992), 23.

[5] News story, radio station WMAQ, Chicago, May 17, 1992.

[6] Kimball, Tenured Radicals; Sykes, ProfScam; Charles J. Sykes, The Hollow Men (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1990); Dinesh D'Souza, Illiberal Education (New York: Free Press, 1991).